

## Citizens petition for a referendum on the fate of the Blue Bridge

SAM WILLIAMS

One side is talking about apples, the other oranges.

Mayor Fortin wrote an op-ed in the *Times Colonist* the other day, launching the war of words that will dominate his and a lot of other people's holiday season this year. He started off with: "The city will soon seek permission from Victorians to borrow the funds necessary to replace the Johnson Street Bridge. As we take steps toward one of the most exciting projects in Victoria's history, it is important complete, accurate information is available."

There he was, right off the bat, putting his trademark happy-face spin on a process that many people feel is profoundly misguided, has eliminated genuine public input and is badly tilted toward excluding consideration of the real issues at stake. Was "exciting projects" one of the reasons you voted for Dean Fortin? By choosing to force his constituents to gather—in the howling wind and rain—a minimum of 6,343 signatures (more people than voted for either councillor Chris Coleman or John Luton in the last municipal election) Fortin is doing anything but "seeking permission." So much for "accurate."

It's going to be interesting for most people to sort through the arguments of the two sides. You know the expression, "comparing apples with oranges," right? It implies that two different things that really shouldn't be compared *are* being compared. In this battle over the fate of the Johnson Street Bridge, one side, represented by the mayor, sees the battle as merely a matter of how a new bridge is going to be funded. The other side, the people who have to go out and gather signatures, are aiming to have the full set of options costed and explored, including the possibility of fixing the bridge. To get that, the mayor is forcing them to first successfully counter-petition, secondly win a referendum, and then, he says, he *might* consider their suggestion. Does that sound reasonable to you?

Mayor Fortin and most of his council seem to think the choices that matter to people are whether the new bridge should be a rolling bascule, single cable-stayed bascule, or reverse bascule. The mayor's side will frame the issue as if the choice has already been made and, Gosh, it's exciting, isn't it? They're going to be arguing oranges.

The counter-petition proponents, largely but not exclusively bridge preservationists, want the question of whether to fix the bridge or demolish it put to a referendum so the city's electors can decide. They want a process that will generate more information about the cost and other aspects of fixing the bridge. They're going to be arguing apples. The general public is going to be either energized or apathetic, informed or misinformed. And because the two sides are going to be arguing apples and oranges, they are certainly going to be confused.

Let's start with a little accurate information. (There's plenty of time later for inaccuracy.) In November 2007, the City of Victoria put out a request for proposal in an effort to get a handle on the state of one of its major infrastructure properties, the Johnson Street Bridge. Apparently this action was prompted by the 2007 release of a report



on Canada's aging public infrastructure, *Danger Ahead: The Coming Collapse of Canada's Municipal Infrastructure*.

Delcan was chosen from six applicants for the job. The company spent two days examining the bridge in June 2008, and their 232-page assessment was delivered to the city's engineering department in February 2009. On April 2, council was given the report's findings. Without putting any spin on the report, here—in a nutshell—is what it said: the bridge was perfectly safe, the electrical and mechanical systems were nearing the end of their life and needed to be replaced, there's a bit of pack rust and, oh—by the way—

the bridge has seismic vulnerability. To bring the bridge up to snuff, including painting, new electrical and mechanical systems, dealing with the rust, fixing the aging foundations and taking care of that seismic problem—and let's throw in a 40 percent contingency—would cost something like \$23.6 million. Almost as an afterthought it gives a three-page mention of an option to replace the bridge and what that might cost: \$35.26 million. Delcan's report also included a separate assessment of the bridge's heritage value (more on this later).

To understand the current showdown between the mayor—along with most of his council—and an angry, large and growing crowd saying show us the real choices, you have to understand what happened on April 23 of this year. Council first learned of the Delcan findings on April 2. Just three weeks later, on April 23, council passed a motion that approved in principle demolition of the bridge, euphemistically referred to as "replacement." So what was revealed about the bridge between April 2 and April 23 that made council quickly abandon the option that the lengthy Delcan report clearly showed was both cheaper and more in line with long held community values?

The quick answer is: not much. And making this decision didn't cost the councillors much time or hand-wringing. After the April 2 meeting where council learned what the Delcan report said, they met on April 9. Council minutes show issues around the bridge were not discussed. Then came a meeting on April 23 where, the minutes show, council convened at 9:03 in the morning. After regular start-up business, the first item on the agenda was a joint presentation on the bridge by Hugh Hawk of Delcan and Mike Lai of the City's engineering department. By 10:41 a.m. council had listened to the presentation, asked questions, voted in principle to "replace" the bridge and recessed. The whole process took less than 100 minutes.

You can read what council learned from Hawk and Lai at [www.johnsonstreetbridge.com](http://www.johnsonstreetbridge.com). Hit the "Project" tab, scroll down to "Council Updates" and click on "Powerpoint presented to Committee of the Whole, April 23." The Powerpoint presentation the councillors watched, by the way, is what a very generous person would probably describe as "abridged" and "biased." The only example of a repair job on an old bridge was one with cost overruns and delays. As we later learned, thanks to the citizens

## Giving the gift of health

**THERE HE WAS, RIGHT OFF THE BAT, putting his trademark happy-face spin on a process that many people feel is profoundly misguided, has eliminated genuine public input and is badly tilted toward excluding consideration of the real issues at stake. Was “exciting projects” one of the reasons you voted for Dean Fortin?**

at JohnsonStreetBridge.org, there are lots of examples of successful bridge restorations. It might worry Victorians that a choice between two different routes to a solution with a cost differential of \$10 million (this later grew to about \$38 million) was made on the basis of this crude presentation with hardly time for an eye-blink of sober consideration.

This was the basis on which council eliminated any further consideration of whether to fix the bridge or demolish it and launched a replacement process of escalating ambition and cost. For example, on April 23 when the councillors made this choice, the price for a new bridge was pegged at \$35-40 million. A month later the addition of exciting frills had pushed the price to \$63 million.

And how much would fixing the bridge have cost? Was Delcan's rough estimate of \$23.6 million terribly off the mark? Well we just don't know. Council started thinking oranges—exciting projects—before any definitive information about costs was generated. It could have been less than that, it could have been more. The apple crew want to know but the mayor's idea of what constitutes “complete” information is the future laid out in terms of oranges.

WHEN DELCAN WAS HIRED BY THE CITY TO DO THE SURVEY of the bridge, part of their mandate was to include an assessment of the bridge's heritage value. That assessment was done by Hal Kalman of Commonwealth Historic Resources Management and in the conclusion of his report he wrote, “The Johnson Street Bridge is a very significant heritage landmark whose characteristics illustrate many key themes in the development of Victoria.” Kalman's report analyzes the bridge's heritage value in terms of social-historical values, engineering values and contextual values and he clearly gives the structure a thumbs up: “The Johnson Street Bridge comprises a key part of [the] larger cultural landscape that contains many heritage resources relating to the E&N Railway. These include the E&N Roundhouse complex in Victoria West, which comprises the Roundhouse, Backshop, Car Shop, Stores Building, and Turntable, all virtually unaltered since their construction in 1913 and collectively designated a municipal heritage site and a national historic site.”

In City council's rush to judgment in April, they seem to have exhibited a kind of collective, hopefully temporary, amnesia about Victoria's long-standing commitment to heritage preservation as a keystone of the city's cultural and economic character. That effort has been recognized by both heritage professionals—in 2001 Victoria became the second Canadian city to be awarded the Prince of Wales prize for Municipal Heritage Leadership—but also by cultural tourists who, according to Tourism Victoria, bring billions of dollars in tourism revenue to the city each year. What council did not calculate—this would have taken more than 100 minutes, and besides, calculation is *sooo* not exciting—was the monetary value of an existing “very significant heritage landmark.” That would have required a complex evaluation for which council appears to have been unwilling to make time. In

his holiday season, why not show loved ones you truly care with gifts that promote healthy living? “We have many gift ideas for pampering someone special,” says Diane Regan, owner of Triangle Healing Products. Popular items on Christmas wish lists are Apollo SAD lamps, Quantum Stir Wands, Osteo Exercise Balls, and the “Teeter Hang Ups” Inversion Table for healing back injuries. Or, for a truly special gift, Diane carries a full range of premium juicers, blenders, food dehydrators, air/water purifiers, sprouters, and Titanium non-stick cookware hand cast in Germany for lifetime use. This special cookware produces nutrient-rich dishes packed with flavour, and can be used to prepare an entire meal in one pot without having to use the oven. The happy chef who unwraps this gift will be able to bring Christmas dinner to the table in half the time!

“The cold and flu season is particularly bad this year, so it's more important than ever to maintain air quality at home,” reminds Diane. Her best-selling IQAir Health Pro room air purifier cleanses the air of a wide range of pollutants, including molecular irritants that often plague asthma sufferers. Water purification systems for home use are also available, so that you can fulfil one of life's most basic needs as purely and beneficially as possible.

There are plenty of new products available this holiday season, too. Products like the MRS 2000+ Magnetic Resonance System from Germany, designed to improve cellular health in just a few minutes a day. “The human body has an essential need for low-level electromagnetism, the primary source of which is the earth's electromagnetic fields,” says Dr. Joel Carmichael, chiropractor and MRS 2000 medical spokesperson. He explains that electromagnetic frequencies produced by modern technologies interfere with this natural process, resulting in a variety of health problems. Magnetic resonance systems like the MRS 2000, which produce natural electromagnetic frequencies, are designed to restore healthy cellular functions. “When all the cells of the body are resonating in harmony with one another the body is able to fend off the harmful effects of electrosmog,” says Carmichael.

“We offer complimentary sessions on the MRS 2000,” says Diane, who also invites visitors to experience the healing benefits of her far-infrared saunas by Radiant Health using Colour Light Therapy. “We have portable saunas for as little as \$488!” Spa Services for foot spas, saunas, bio-mats and Vertical Vibration treatments remain ever popular too, available in both single sessions and packages. Or, if you're still not sure what to choose, gift certificates allow your loved ones all the fun of a shopping spree!

“Gifts from Triangle Healing benefit the whole family,” says Diane. “I wish you and your family a holiday season full of happiness and good health.”



Clockwise from top: the Pure Water Inc. Mini-Classic II water distiller; Blendtec blender; the IQAir Health Pro room air purifier.

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choosing to demolish valuable heritage infrastructure, shouldn't part of their consideration have included a calculation of the inherent monetary loss to the city, each year, for the remaining time the bridge could stand? That would be accurate and complete information. If you were talking apples.

Decisions can be exciting to make, but they can also have unexpected consequences. Isn't it pretty much a law that the more you rush to get something done, the bigger the surprises later on? Let's look at just one possible surprise from council's decision to demolish the Blue Bridge.

In June of this year, award-winning developer Mike Miller's Abstract Developments applied for a development permit which would have seen the demolition of a house he owned at 1082 Richmond Avenue and construction of new condos. Miller claimed the building was unaffordable because it was inefficient to heat. The property was already zoned for the use he was proposing. He offered to relocate the old building at his expense. The City's record of the council meeting that turned Miller down shows the City had not previously identified the property as having heritage value. Councillors who voted to decline Miller's request included Pam Madoff and Sonya Chandler. According to the minutes, councillor Madoff said "There are so many other ways to develop the site in harmony with the community values without the loss of rental housing and a heritage building. The greenest way of building is to maintain the existing building." Chandler offered, "The applicant has a reputation for preservation of heritage and this building has heritage value. This community and council understands that this building is heritage even if it is not on the registry."

Now imagine if the City goes ahead with demolition of the Blue Bridge, a structure whose heritage value has been judged "very high" by the experts. Isn't it likely the City would then be confronted with the precedent they've set? Why wouldn't Mike Miller go back to council and say something like this: "Besides being hard to heat, the house is sitting on a brick foundation. In a significant earthquake, the foundation is likely to crumble and the house could collapse. People could be killed. Other houses like this have collapsed in earthquakes in other cities like San Francisco, and people have died. I really appreciate the heritage value of the house, but it's unsafe and demolition is a 'must do,' not a 'nice to do,' to quote Mayor Fortin."

Miller's house *is* sitting on a brick foundation which *is* likely to crumble in a significant earthquake. If council chose instead to fix the Blue Bridge, they would be able to say to Miller—and who knows how many other owners of heritage properties who might want to skip the complexity of preservation—something like, "Faced with the same situation, we chose to protect both the safety of our citizens and the heritage values. We expect you to do the same."

It's true that this is a hypothetical situation. But much of this issue is based on a hypothetical situation: who knows when an earthquake will shake Victoria?

WHEN THE MAYOR AND COUNCIL ARE TALKING ABOUT what they *want* this issue to be about—their "exciting project"—they believe they're on track to make the future a brighter one. They're planning today for that bright and shiny future where, someday, many more people will bicycle downtown. Someday, they hope, there will be a well-used train service over the bridge, even though right now the once-a-day train that goes to Courtenay each day is often close to empty both coming and going from the city.

Langford optimistically pre-approved zoning for nearly 15,000 homes in anticipation of the "silver tsunami" of retiring baby boomers from

other parts of Canada who apparently want to live their final years next door to Costco. Langford's forward-looking optimism got so far ahead of reality they built a bridge that goes from nowhere to nowhere. Come to think of it, striking similarities between the don't-think-about-it-let's-just-do-it styles of Mayor Fortin and Mayor Stewart Young are emerging. But are these guys really forward-looking visionaries, or are they just big spenders with bigger than usual political ambitions? There's nothing like a big public infrastructure project to help build your profile, just in case you get the chance to run for premier.

If Mayor Fortin and council had done a thorough exploration of the cost of fixing the existing bridge and nailed down all the details that went with that option in the first place, alongside what they have done in terms of considering a new bridge, how much extra time would that have taken? Another 100 minutes? A couple of weeks? A month? And if they had taken that extra time and presented two clear options to the public, one where they compared apples to apples, what would they have lost? All along they've been chasing after "sources of funding," a euphemism for money from the community. Perhaps they feel that as long as the money appears to come through the federal government or the province then they don't have to be accountable to the community that elected them to *be* accountable. Whatever drives them, they've proceeded in a fashion that has kept them from benefiting from the full strength of this community's collective wisdom.

The lack of genuine public consultation on this issue has been breathtaking and many of these councillors could face a difficult time should they seek re-election. The one exception to this is Geoff Young, who from the beginning has pleaded for full consideration of the costs and logistics of fixing the bridge. He seems to be the only councillor that can distinguish apples from oranges and why you might want to know the price of each before you decide to buy one or the other. At the council meeting on November 19 which approved the counter-petition process, councillor Sonya Chandler claimed, "We can't un-know what we know." Geoff Young disagreed: "We do know that we have to do something about the bridge...But I don't know on the basis of the information we have that we must build a new bridge. And with respect colleagues—you don't know either."

Anna Russo is helping the volunteer, preservation-oriented JohnsonStreetBridge.Org group strategize. She's had experience with the counter-petition process over an earlier issue and doesn't like it much: "It's divisive, it's negative, it's disingenuous—it's called the Alternate *Approval* Process, but we can only disapprove of what the city is proposing."

But it's the only option available now to citizens who question the council's decision-making on this, the largest most expensive infrastructure project in the city's history.

*Those wanting to sign the counter-petition or help gather signatures can pick up forms at city hall or download them from the city's website ([www.johnsonstreetbridge.com](http://www.johnsonstreetbridge.com)) or <http://johnsonstreetbridge.org>. Originals must reach City Hall by January 4, but JohnsonStreetBridge.Org is hoping people will send in their completed forms to them at Box 5324, Victoria, V8R 6S4, so they can count them and ensure compliance with the rules (will green ink be disqualified—or forms without postal codes?) well before the deadline. "Do it now, before Christmas," urges JohnsonStreetBridge.Org's Ross Crockford. They hope to have a street front office soon—check their website.*

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Sam Williams is a Victoria writer